

MEDIAEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 12: SALAMANDRA, DAT OEC TFIER MEDE VERSLAET

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INTRODUCTION

An interesting animal, the mediaeval salamander. Nowadays an innocent representative of the amphibians, but in Maerlant's time an animal that strikes the not yet empirically infected imagination and has a rich (christian) symbolic meaning.

SALAMANDRA, DAT OEC TFIER MEDE VERSLAET

*Salamandra es een maniere
Van serpente, die in den viere*
595 *Leven daer et in gaet,
Ja dat oec tfier mede verslaet.
Plinius, Jacob ende Adelijn,
Aristoteles ende Solijn
Segghen ende doen verstaen,*
600 *Dat na die lacerte es ghedaen.*
(vss 593-600)

The salamander belongs to a snake species which is able to live in the fire, yes, which can even put out the fire (that is why we nowadays still know the fire salamander. I shall come back in more detail on the fire-proof capacity of the salamander).

Rather a lot of illustrious scientists: Pliny, Jacob of Vitry, Adelinus, Aristotle and Solinus, tell us that the salamander looks like the lizard.

*Ysidorus spreect: sine maniere
Gaet voer alle venijnde diere.
Plinius seghet: menne siets niet,
Sonder alst sere te reynen pliet.*
(vss 601-604)

For Isidore of Seville the salamander is the most venomous animal that exists. Maerlant has drawn our attention to this already: in the verses 34-36 he told us that snakes generally are only able to kill one person at the same time. He also mentioned that the salamander could kill more than one person at the same time. Further on we are extensively informed about the way this can be done. Pliny also remarks that you hardly see the salamander unless it rains hard.

- 605 *Sijn spu dats utermaten quat.
Ist datter een mensche in gaet,
Hem ontvallet al sijn haer.
Op boemen clemtet ende daer
Venijntet dappele, ende wier of bijt,*
610 *Dat hi stervet in corter tijd.
Valtet in twater, hi es emmer doet,
Diere of nut clene of groet.
(vss 605-612)*

It is the saliva of the salamander that makes the animal so dangerous: a man loses his life when he comes into contact with it. It sometimes happens that salamanders climb trees and, for example, poison the apples on it. He who eats such an apple dies immediately. When a salamander falls into the water, he who drinks of it, dies.

Amphibians, it is true, have venomous glands which can produce a strong venomous fluid, but this has seldom a harmful effect on a human (Grzimek, 1973, pag. 333).

- Men vint erehande maniere
Van salamandren die leven in viere,*
615 *Ende hebben wulle ofte haer:
Ende daer of seghtmen over waer,
Datmen daer of gordel ende cleider maect,
Dien nemmerme gheen brant ghenaect.
(vss 613-618)*

A salamander species exists which lives in the fire and which is covered with a kind of wool or with hair. From that, it is said clothes and girdles are made which cannot burn.

Aristotle already drew attention to this quality and there is evidence from later centuries that seems to confirm his belief. Costello cites from the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, an Italian Renaissance artist and silversmith, an incident from 1505 which clearly shows he belonged to the few people who had the privilege to see a salamander in the middle of a solid burning fire. Lest he would never forget that incident, his father gave him a box on the ear that made his head reel. That this doubtful approach had the desired effect, is evident from the fact that Benvenuto Cellini had not forgotten the incident when he wrote his autobiography (Costello, 1979, pag. 130).

- Men seghet van pauwes Alexandre,
Dat hi van ere salamandre
Hadde een cleet, alst lelec was,
Woerpmment int vier, ende als ict las,
So quamt uut scoen ende claer.
Broeder Alebrecht seit over waer,*
625 *Dat hi daer of een gordel sach,
Ende dat voer hem int vier lach.
Alst gloiede dan dedement uut,
Onghescaet haer ende huut.
(vss 619-628)*

Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) was said to be in possession of a mantle of salamander wool. When it was dirty, it was thrown into a fire from where it came out clean and fine in colour.

Brother Albrecht (Albertus Magnus) said positively that he had seen a girdle made of that material (salamander wool) laid in a fire and when the girdle was red-hot, it was taken out unmarked.

A here not mentioned legend by Maerlant stated that the Emperor of India had a mantle made of 1000 salamander skins (Costello, 1979, pag. 132).

Solinus seght daer toe:
630 *Salamandra en heeft hi noch soe.*
Alle draghen si, als wi kennen,
Ende legghen eyere als hennen.
(vss 629-632)

In the name of Solinus Maerlant ends with the remark that salamanders know no sex differences (no he and no she is known). They all can become pregnant and lay eggs, like chickens.

EXCURS

Plinius turns out to be responsible for the enormous underlining of the fables about the salamander. From him also comes the warning that this animal is able to exterminate entire populations. Besides the already mentioned poisoning of fruit trees, he even mentions the possibility that people can get poisoned when they eat the bread that is baked by a baker who used wood that was poisoned by salamanders (Costello, 1979, pag. 131). This poisoning has, in all probability, another reason. Costello mentions that in 922 in France 40.000 people died of *ignis sacer*, the St. Anthony fire. It is easy to blame a salamander that is found in a bag of flour for this catastrophe. But the real reason is different of course. The St. Anthony fire is an ischemic gangrene of the feet and hands, caused by ergotism. This ergotism is caused by ergot poisoning, something that in those times would not have been imaginary. The endemic outburst of *Ignis sacer* increases the legend around the salamander.

White mentions, as an explanation for fireproof salamanders, that it could have been possible that tree stumps, in which salamanders hibernate were thrown in a weakly burning fire. When a salamander is driven into a corner the animal secretes a fluid. This fluid was held responsible for extinguishing the fire (Topsell, 1973, pag. 219). Aristotle had already ascertained this phenomenon. However, this phenomenon was very exaggerated by Plinius and thus became popular. Plinius knew very well that a salamander does burn in a fire, for he did it himself once to make a medicine from the ashes of the animal (White, 1960, pag. 184; Topsell, 1973, pag. 219).

Topsell tells the story of a so-called Andreas: ... [he] did dippe a peece of cloth in the blood of a Salamander, and tried afterward whither it would burne or not, but did not find that it would burne, wherefore he put it upon his hand, and thrust that into the fire, and then he felt no manner of paine (Topsell, 1973, pag. 218).

In 1716 the legend of the salamander was the subject of an empiric research. The decisive answer was given in *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* of the afore mentioned year: a salamander that was thrown into the fire, swelled and formed a thick, slimy substance which extinguished the nearby coals. The animal withdrew to the extinguished spot, after which the phenomenon was repeated. In this way the animal survived for two hours in the fire. Hereafter the salamander lived another nine years (Costello, 1979, pag. 133).

However the salamander was very venomous, it had in earlier days its natural predators. Pliny already mentions *cantharides* ('Amongst the Belgies or Netherlanders, it its tearmed *Spaensche Vlieghe*', Topsell, 1973, pag. 96) as enemies of the salamander. The flesh of a sea tortoise mixed with that of frogs is an excellent remedy for salamander bites, and nothing is more opposed

to the salamander than the tortois (Pliny, book XXXII, 35, pag. 485).

Because every good observer was able to see that the salamander was not a hairy animal, people searched for another explanation for the existence of salamander wool. This was explained by stating that salamanders knew a cocoon-phase, which supplied the wool.

It was Marco Polo, returning from a voyage to the Far East, who gave an explanation for the confusion around this salamander wool, which undoubtedly must be asbestos:

A certain mountain salamander wears a substance that, when it is crumbled, forms fibers that in former days were imputed to an animal. The salamander wool is dried, pounded in a copper mortar and washed. The remaining earth is removed and the fibres are spinned into a material which is far from white, but is bleached in the fire. By the same procedure the material is also cleaned (Costello, 1979, pag. 131).

Nowadays it is commonly known that asbestos is not a pleasant substance. You can get cancer from it. Maerlant mentioned in verse 607 as a symptom of salamander poisoning that the hair of a victim fell out. Plinius strenghtens this assumption by mentioning that the skin changed in colour. Both symptoms can be caused by cancer.

In the Middle Ages the four elements earth, water, air and fire were still represented symbolically by animals. The salamander was the symbol of fire and was in that capacity considered a statue of Christ. In the Middle Ages one learnt that the salamander, living in the fire, preserves the good and wards off evil. In this way the animal also symbolises justice. At the same time this explains why the French king François I included the salamander in his arms with the motto *Nutrisco et Exinquo* ('I feed and I refresh'). The salamander is also attributed to purity and virginity. These virtues staying pure amid the passions and sins that rage around them.

The theocentric nature of the Middle Ages let no opportunity pass to give actions, objects etc. a Christian-symbolic moral. This is also the case for the salamander. Augustinus points, in his book 'The city of God', to the salamander to convince non-believers that bodies in hell burn without being consumed: who would dare to doubt this, when a simple mortal creature such as the salamander stays alive in the fire without suffering any pain, something considered to be the punishment of hell (Augustinus, 1983, XXI, 2, pag. 1064).

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